

# Preservation: Quick Q&A

## **Our hamlet is on the State and National Registers of Historic Places: Aren't our historic properties already protected by that?**

No. Listing on the registers confers only one protection: public funding cannot be used to comprise the historic value of a listed property without historical preservation review by the state. Listed properties may be torn down or significantly altered at any time as long as private funds are used.

## **Most people in this hamlet, both locals and second homeowners, already take good care of their homes and businesses and preserve their historic features — why bother with a law when people are already complying?**

Sadly, our history is no guarantee of our future: notice how many for sale signs line our Main Street today and you realize that any or all of those properties could be gone tomorrow. Even the most caring homeowner cannot guarantee that his heirs or future owners will care about a property's historic value. Also, when new construction does happen (as it did with the Sunoco station and the bank) and new owners **want** to fit in with to the town's historic ambience, the town cannot offer any advice or guidance if there are no guidelines in place.

## **Will the historic preservation commission decide which property owners must restore their homes or make repairs?**

No. The Historic Preservation Commission is an advisory body and does not suggest projects to any homeowner. The commission does advise on the historical compatibility of major exterior changes, such as additions or new construction that homeowners undertake on their own. Any pre-existing alterations made to your home are grandfathered. And the commission does not review such alterations as window replacement, siding, satellite dishes, or paint colors.

## **Will a preservation ordinance interfere with my rights as a property owner?**

The suggestions of the preservation commission are designed to help you protect the value of your own home by ensuring its historic values should you decide to make major modifications. At the same time, their input into your neighbors' projects will help maintain the property values of your neighborhood and your home. The ordinance does not impede your property ownership rights unless you wanted to demolish, dramatically alter or move a listed property without review.

## **What if I can't afford or don't want to follow the commission's review decisions?**



Suggestions by the commission are subject to hardship exemptions included in the ordinance and the guidelines.

Also, any property owner who disagrees with the commission's recommendations may appeal them to the Roxbury Town Board.

# Protecting the future ...



... of Our Past

*"I want to see if somewhere there is something left in life with charm and grace, the calm dignity life can have when it's lived by gentle folks, the genial grace of days that are gone. I'm going to hunt in old towns . . . where some of the old times must linger."*

— Margaret Mitchell



# PRESERVING THE FUTURE OF ROXBURY'S HERITAGE: A WORK IN PROGRESS

Roxbury residents can take great pride in the vision they've shown for many generations, in prizing the quality and richness of their architecture, from modest farmhouses to the imperious Gould Church. A singular combination of factors converged in Roxbury that make it truly unique among Catskills hamlets: from the influence and generosity of Jay Gould's daughter, Helen, to Roxbury's geographical placement off the beaten track of the Catskills' most heavily commercialized thoroughfares to the inherent civic pride that this close-knit community has always shown.

In recent years, that pride has become more pro-active as our Roxbury businesses and community realize the economic interconnectedness and potential of our shared architectural riches. Tourists strolling our quiet, maple-lined Main Street bring much-needed cash flow into our local economy — just as they did decades ago, when the train brought them to town and huge boarding houses and hotels welcomed them.

Those days are gone, but given the indelible restrictions and regulations we face as part of the New York City Watershed, tourism is one industry that is truly "sustainable" for our children and for generations to come, if we protect the assets that bring visitors here.

Attracting tourists certainly wasn't the foremost factor when Roxbury's Main Street was first threatened: it was much more about saving our own hometown, its green spaces and its gracious old homes. It's a great story of local ingenuity, and it's still a work in progress.

It all started in 1980, when Kirkside Retirement Home was slated to close, and Kirkside Park was targeted for "development." Community activists — from multi-generational natives to second homeowners — banded together to keep the retirement home alive and to insure that the park remained a public resource.

In 1981, the once elegant Kirkside Park was deeded to the town, although like a bag

lady, she was a derelict shadow of her former self: rundown and looking shabby. But underneath the brambles and crumbling stone walls, the landscaping genius of Ferdinand Mangold was still intact. In the 1990s, a massive restoration project, fueled by local talent and sweat, brought Helen Gould Shepard's eden back to life, with gravel paths, majestic streamside stone escarpments, and rustic Adirondack bridges. In the 1990s, another of Helen's legacies, the lovely Greek Revival YMCA building, was restored as a multipurpose arts center for The Roxbury Arts Group, with an art gallery, studio spaces and a performance hall, enabling it to re-join the community as an asset and year-round attraction.

The creation of the vintage Roxbury Nine base ball team has likewise taken an historic asset — Kirkside Park — and turned it into an active and viable economic "player" in our town's economy.

An even greater threat to Roxbury's character came in the form of a dubious "opportunity," when the State Department of Transportation proposed widening State Route 30 (otherwise known as "Main Street") in 1988 — a plan that would have endangered many older homes, uprooted all of the 100-year old maples lining the street and truncated Main Street lawns to miserly swatches. The only "escape route" was extremely labor intensive, with little time to spare: once again a dedicated group of citizens banded together to do the voluminous research and data collection required to nominate Main Street to the National and State Registers of Historic Places. In just a few months, the nomination was pulled together and the

Property holders in Roxbury show much pride in keeping their houses well painted and lawns well trimmed, which adds very much to the appearance of our beautiful village. That Roxbury is the neatest, cleanest and prettiest village along the Ulster Delaware railroad is an undisputed fact.

— Roxbury Times of early 1900s

listing was awarded, thereby salvaging the beauty of Main Street from the decimation of any publicly financed "progress."

But the Main Street listing on the registers in 1988 (and the entire hamlet in 2003), has also created a false sense of security for many of us. It's a common misconception that a

listing on the State and National Registers protects a property from wanton destruction or alterations that would destroy its historic integrity. The listing actually confers no protection whatsoever where private ownership and financing are concerned. Historic properties may

be torn down by any corporate or private owner with no review or vetting process. The only stipulation provided for listed properties is that public funds (i.e., state, or federal) can not be used to destroy or compromise historic properties without review by the State Historic Preservation Office. If OddLots or Bargain Basement wanted to purchase and demolish the Old Corner Store tomorrow and erect a ten-story concrete monstrosity, they could do so with impunity, without any community or local government input. Aside from the devastation to our day-to-day lives, such a scenario would also wreak havoc on our town's long-term economic viability and gut the value of our hamlet's homes and businesses. Once that "value" has been lost, there is no way to retrieve it, anymore than we can recreate the magic of the LeaCroft or other lost properties.

Julian Adams, a SHPO community liaison who works with historic towns and cities throughout New York, has visited Roxbury several times to talk to residents about preservation efforts at the community level.

The most successful preservation efforts, he explained, don't follow any stringent, cookie-cutter set of rules and restrictions, instead they grow in response to the communities they serve. "I travel all around the state, and I can tell you, Roxbury has something nobody else has. But I also know — particularly where there is resort or development pressure — that buildings you've cherished for more than 150 years can disappear overnight. Preservation is not about stopping change, but managing it, taking what you have and making it work for your community. It's all about what your community wants."

Adams clarified another common misconception about preservation, which is often confused with zoning. Zoning controls how a property or area is used (residence, business, industry). Preservation efforts don't focus on whether your Queen Anne is a laundromat, a deli, a boarding house or a private home. Rather, preservation guidelines help you retain the exterior qualities that make your home valuable and make it an integral part of your historic neighborhood.

Roxbury's proposed preservation ordinance has been extensively shaped by the community and will create some core guidelines regarding demolition, new construction, and moving properties. Any guidelines developed by Roxbury's Historic Preservation Commission would be subject to the same community input and final approval by the Town Board. "I truly believe our community can come to a common sense consensus on this," says Town Councilman Steve Walker.

Please review the enclosed summary and join us at a public hearing on Monday, May 12 at 7 p.m. to continue the conversation about protecting what's special about Roxbury and moving into a shared future together. You can find the full ordinance on-line at [www.roxburyny.com](http://www.roxburyny.com) or at the Town Hall.

